

AN APOSTLE OF OUR DAYS.

By R. F. O'CONNOR.



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AN

Apostle of Our Days.

*This booklet belongs to
St. Michael's Magdalen.*

BY

R. F. O'CONNOR.

*Author of "His Grey Eminence," and Translator of the Lives of
St. Francis of Assisi, St. Clare of Assisi, and St. Margaret of Cortona,
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THE CATHOLIC TRUTH SOCIETY OF IRELAND,

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Albert Lacombe
D. M. C.

An Apostle of Our Days.

IN the march of nations, as well as in the march of mind, the missionary occupies a place in the forefront rank. If trade follows the flag, civilisation follows the missionary. Ambassador of a peaceful Power, whose objective is not the acquisition of territory, but the extension of the Church's sphere of action and influence—the conquest of souls, not the conquest of nations—he is generally the pioneer, the precursor. Either single-handed or with few companions, the roughest and most adventurous part of the work often falls to his share. It is undertaken without thought of self, of personal profit, or of earthly reward. As he aims higher than the others, he looks for a higher reward than earth can give, and is content to wait for it.

The world, however, although it aims lower, and is bent chiefly on material civilisation, is not wholly unmindful of the part the missionary plays in the great drama of human progress as it is enacted on this planet of ours. Peace, it has been said, has its victories as well as war, and the missionary, always to be found in the vanguard, has largely helped to achieve these bloodless victories. Among such victors is to be classed the veteran missionary of the Canadian North-west, the venerable Oblate, Father Lacombe, “the Blackrobe *Voyageur*.” His name deserves to be writ large in the history of the vast territory into which Sir Walter Raleigh's old Dominion has expanded; whose illimitable dimensions, Lord Dufferin said, alike confound the arithmetic of the surveyor and the verification of the explorer; embracing an area far more extensive than half a dozen European kingdoms. For centuries the native Indians, as yet monarchs of all they surveyed, hunted the buffalo over the wide-stretching prairies and sold their rich furs to the English adventurers who formed the Hudson's Bay Company—chartered over

250 years ago by Charles II., "the merry monarch, scandalous and poor"—and the rival North-west Company, until rivalry gave way to amalgamation.

It was on the banks of the Red River, where it forms a junction with the Assiniboine, that civilisation made the first effort to establish itself in the illimitable domain of the fur-traders. About 1735 a fort was built by a French adventurer on the site of the present city of Winnipeg. This Red River settlement became the headquarters of the Hudson's Bay Company. Churches and school-houses were erected to provide for the religious and educational needs of the people, the most conspicuous of the former being that of St. Boniface, whose bells sounded welcome in the ears of the nomads of the plains.

"Is it the clang of the wild geese,
Is it the Indian's yell
That lends to the voice of the North wind
The tone of a far-off bell?

"The *voyageur* smiles as he listens
To the sound that grows apace:
Well he knows the vesper ringing
Of the bells of Saint Boniface.

"The bells of the Roman mission
That call from their turrets twain,
To the boatmen on the river,
To the hunters on the plain."

The majority of the French half-breeds, or Metis, the descendants of French-Canadian fathers and Indian mothers, lived almost entirely on the fur-trade as *voyageurs*, trappers, and hunters.

THE APOSTLE OF THE INDIANS AND HALF-BREEDS.

Father Lacombe constituted himself the apostle of the Indians and half-breeds. He lived their life, he made himself one with them; laboured for them, prayed for them, pleaded for them. For more than

sixty years he devoted himself to their service with a whole-hearted self-sacrifice that was heroic. French-Canadian, native and to the manner born, there was a tincture of Indian blood in his remote ancestry on the maternal side, for his mother, Agathe Duhamel, was a descendant of a French maiden, one of the Duhamels of Saint Sulpice, carried into captivity over a hundred years earlier by an Ojibway chief, to whom she bore two sons. It is commonly said that blood is thicker than water, and this may account to some extent for his affection for the Metis or half-breeds; but it was human affection, exalted and supernaturalised by faith, and zeal born of faith, by that *Caritas Christi* which is the grand wonder-working motive principle of the missionary propagandism of the Catholic Church, whether in crowded cities or in remote lands beyond the confines of civilisation. He came of a roving race, the early French settlers, those knight-errants of western civilisation, those adventurous pioneers, *voyageurs*, who, impelled by what the Germans call *wanderlust*, pushed their explorations farther and farther westward in the wake of the Sieur de La Vérendrye and his sons, whose progress had been checked by the wars between France and England, when Wolfe and Montcalm fell on the Plains of Abraham, and the fleur-de-lis was struck on the old fort of the Canadian capital.*

His father, Albert Lacombe, was a simple farmer, attached to his house and his farm work, with no more ambitious outlook than to see his sons follow in his footsteps; neither rich nor poor, pious, thrifty and industrious. His son, Albert, the future Oblate, had to take his share of farm work, picking stones on new land, feeding the pigs, or driving the plough. But, chafing at its monotony, he was early fired with a desire to leave the farm and go to college—to be a great man, a priest maybe like the old curé, Monsieur de Vian; or, in place of poring over books, follow the example of his grand-uncle, Joseph

* J. G. Bourinot, *Story of Canada*.

Lacombe, go farther afield into the, as yet, mysterious and little-known Pays d'en Haut with the fur company, and be the most daring *voyageur* of them all. These were the heroes of his boyhood's day-dreams, and typified the twin-spirit of the apostle and the pioneer already working within him. The kindly old curé grew attached to him, and called him "*mon petit sauvage*," my little Indian. He fostered his budding vocation, sent him to college and paid his way, prophetically remarking: "Who knows? . . . some day our little Indian may be a priest and work for the Indians!" This was about 1840, when the boy was thirteen. In 1847 he was called from L'Assomption College, Quebec, to the bishop's palace, Montreal, where he continued his theological studies under the direction of Mgr. Prince, the co-adjutor, having as fellow-student, Edouard Fabre, afterwards Archbishop of Montreal, with whom he formed a life-long friendship. He was very happy at the bishop's house; the Canons loved him, and he was brought in contact with parish priests from all parts of the country. "They were fine pleasant men," he recalls; "I liked to meet them. They lived in comfortable houses; they were liked by their people. They did good work. . . . But I would look at them and say to myself, 'No, that is not for me. I would not live quiet like that for all the world. I must go out and work—I must save my soul in my own way.'"

HIS VOCATION FIXED.

The way was opened to him in the winter of 1848 by Father George Belcourt, a missionary from the far-off Pembina district, who told thrilling stories of the wild rush of the buffalo hunt, of the wily Saulteaux and Metis or murderous Sioux to whom he ministered; of the splendid struggle for human souls in a primitive land. Albert Lacombe, relates his biographer,* hung on the stranger's words, in

* "Father Lacombe, the Black-Robe *Voyageur*." By Katherine Hughes. New York: 1911, p. 10.

the community hall, at table, everywhere he went; and when one Sunday night Father Belcourt preached in the old Cathedral of St. Jacques, at least one young man in the sanctuary listened enraptured to the tales he told and the rousing appeal he made for help. When he depicted in eloquent words the life and work of the missions, "I was struck to the heart," says Father Lacombe. "An interior voice called to me—'*Quem mittam*' (Whom shall I send?), and I said in reply, '*Ecce ego, mitte me*' (Behold I am here; send me)." The next morning he opened his mind to the bishop, who counselled delay and reflection, as did his old patron, the aged Abbé Vian, then invalided in a hospital; while others advised him to give up the idea. But the attraction was becoming stronger the more he reflected. "I knew I wanted to be a priest," he says, "but, failing this mission life, if I had to be a curé, I would have decided to return to the world. I wanted to make every sacrifice or none. That was my nature."

Ordained on June 13, 1849, he returned joyfully to Montreal, only to have his joy turned into sorrow on learning that the Abbé Vian had died suddenly that afternoon. Only the evening before he had talked long with his venerable patron, who, kissing his "little Indian" paternally, blessed him in leaving, with these words: "*Mon cher Albert*, I shall pray to-morrow that you will always be a good and holy priest." That prayer has assuredly been answered. "Whilst I wept beside his inanimate body," says Father Lacombe, "he seemed to say to me: '*Cursum Consummavi*' (I have finished my course). Take my place as priest, for I have helped to make you what you are to-day."

BEGINS HIS MISSIONARY CAREER.

Seven weeks later he set out for the West. After the touching ceremony of the kissing of the missionary's feet, in accordance with the old custom of the Paris Seminary of Foreign Missions, he left

Lachine, still the port of departure for the Pays d'en Haut, as it had been a decade earlier when the flotillas of canoes set out amid the cheers and songs of the *voyageurs*. His destination was the mission of Pembina on the Red River, to which he proceeded *via* St. Paul, which had dropped its old ugly name of Pig's Eye for that of the Abbé Galtier's mission, and consisted of about thirty log buildings, inhabited by French-Canadians, Metis, and a few American traders. For a month, awaiting the arrival of Father Belcourt's brigade, he was installed in a log house, built by the Abbé Galtier in 1841 to serve as chapel and presbytery, and now Bishop Cretin's first episcopal palace! The *ménage* was very primitive. An amusing instance of the shifts to which these pioneer priests were obliged in their poverty to have recourse is related. When he asked Father Revoux where he was to sleep, "Why here," was the response, pointing to a long narrow box. "That box has blankets inside. Just open it." "But that's a coffin!" exclaimed Father Lacombe, shuddering. "Yes," replied the senior priest coolly. "A half-breed died in the woods the other day and I helped to make his coffin. It was too short and we had to make another. I kept this one. It is very useful; I only had blankets before." This was only a foretaste of the many deprivations he was to endure. Like St. Paul, he was "in perils oft." To reach Pembina they had to pursue a muddy, marshy trail through the woods for fear of the roving Indians, a large party of whom once swooped down upon them and exacted a tribute of food, easing them of provisions and articles intended for the mission.

HIS APPRENTICESHIP TO HIS LIFE-WORK.

In this forest mission of Pembina Father Lacombe served his apprenticeship to his life-work. It had been established in 1818 by the Rev. Sevre Dumoulin, was the missionary headquarters for the wandering *Saulteaux*, and, when Father Lacombe reached it, a

village composed of American half-breeds and Indians. It was a famous rendezvous for the buffalo-hunters; and when spring came the Metis crowded into it, until the Mission grew in a few days to the size of a town, and the woodland was dotted with tents. "This," his biographer notes, "was the golden age of the Indian and Metis, when the bison still roamed the great plains in unnumbered thousands. . . . The buffalo was the chief factor of life in the West; its pursuit the chief joy of the native. From the first the missionaries had learned to look on the time of this buffalo hunt as most favourable for teaching Christian doctrine to the Indians. They were then most comfortable and correspondingly amiable, and in the long evenings or longer days, when they sat sunning themselves, while the women prepared the meat of the last kill, the Indian warrior smoked his pipe and listened with pleasure to the old story of the Redemption."*

In 1850 it fell to Father Lacombe's lot to be chaplain to a great hunt, the first of his many buffalo hunts. On the eve he gathered the band together in the open air for evening prayers, when they made the forest ring with echoes of hymns translated by Father Belcourt into Indian. A half-breed hunter having been elected chief, and hunt laws drawn up, the camp set out on its march the next morning after an early Mass, the procession, like some patriarchal exodus in the days of Jacob, moving slowly out over the prairies. There were 800 to 1,000 carts, and over 1,000 men, women and children in camp that year, as well as hundreds of ponies, horses, oxen and dogs. When the scouts sighted in the distance an immense herd of buffalo, and signalled it to the marching Metis, the camp was erected, and in a flash men and horses hurled themselves against the herd at full gallop, the hunters forming an immense line of attack. Father Lacombe, who accompanied them, recited an act of contrition, to which the hunters responded with bent heads; for the hunt might become a life

* Op. cit., p. 24.

or death struggle between man and beast. The buffalo, naturally timid and fearful, grows enraged at its pursuers, and from the moment it is wounded becomes terrible and dangerous. "The story of combats of Spanish bulls, furious at their adversaries," writes Father Lacombe, "conveys a feeble picture compared to this magnificent attack." The hunter exposed himself momentarily to be thrown from his horse and trampled into the earth under a hundred cruel insentient hoofs, or to become a human plaything, tossed again and again into the air from the horns of an enraged animal. In about twenty minutes the immense herd was utterly routed, and hundreds of wounded animals strewed the plains. Close on 800 buffalo had been killed near the base of the Turtle Mountain. The following day the Metis ascended with Father Lacombe to the mountain-top and planted a large wooden cross.

THE CHILDREN OF THE PRAIRIES.

On these hunting expeditions the chaplain-missioner was the father of the party, their physician, their good Samaritan, their counsellor, and the peacemaker who arbitrated in their quarrels. At dawn every morning he said Mass, and during his thanksgiving perfect stillness reigned in the camp; for the Indians and Metis alike respected "the praying man." During the day there was Catechism for the children and instruction for the women and old people. On some days, when the hunters were at home resting, they would come with their pipes and squat around the priest's tent, to listen to him or to help him in his study of Saulteaux, one of the Algonquin dialects; for throughout his life Indian languages had a strong fascination for Father Lacombe, his acquisition of them being aided by a dictionary and grammar compiled by Father Belcourt. Then at other times, when the shades of evening fell and all was quiet, he would ring his bell and gather the whole camp about his tent, where they would

sing hymns and pray, until the priest said good-night to them. "I can never express how good these Metis, children of the prairies, were," observed Father Lacombe. "In that Golden Age when they hunted the buffalo, and practised our Christianity with the fervour of the first Christians, their lives were blameless. They were a beautiful race then, those children of the prairies." Again he recalls rapturously: "*Qu'il etait délicieux pour les Métis comme pour l'Indien, ce temps de l'Age d'Or, quand la chasse était encore abondante!*" (How delightful was that time of the Golden Age to the Metis and the Indians, when hunting was still frequent!)

He would return to the mission-house from the hunt with features bronzed by the sun, soutane soiled and frayed, or even ragged, and the linen and other things in his case of portable altar requisites in disorder and redolent of wood-smoke, happy at the good he had been able to do—souls reconciled to their Maker, or sins prevented by his presence.

HE JOINS THE OBLATES.

He had found his vocation. After another winter in charge of the Pembina mission he went to Montreal, with the vague idea of joining some religious Order, having heard Bishop Provencher speak highly of the Oblates, then a new French Congregation. In 1852, when Bishop Taché, co-adjutor of St. Boniface, was passing through Quebec, Father Lacombe offered him his services for the Red River missions. It was arranged that he should make his novitiate at St. Boniface, and acquaint himself with the constitutions and discipline of the Oblates before taking up missionary work; but at the earnest entreaty of the aged Bishop Provencher, who urgently needed a priest at Fort Edmonton, to replace a missionary, utterly worn out by his labours, he renounced his year of novitiate* and went at once into the mission field.

* He entered on his deferred novitiate at Sainte Anne in 1856, and pronounced his vows as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate.

At Fort Edmonton, the most important post of the Hudson's Bay Company, west of Norway House, whence Chief Factor Rowand, a fiery-spirited Irishman, ruled over a wide district that reached to the Rockies, Father Lacombe, launched upon his life work, to which he was to devote sixty strenuous years, found himself, a young priest, master of his own actions, thrown upon his own resources, left to his own initiative, as he wished to be. First established in 1795, it had become the chief point of the Company's operations on the plains, and was like some rude baronial stronghold in the feudal ages of the old world, with the liege's hall and retainers' cottages, all safely enclosed within high palisades, surmounted by guns. Its occupants had to rough it betimes. There were seasons each year when provisions ran so low that even with lessened rations there was no certainty of to-morrow's fast being broken. Father Lacombe was to experience hardships, and even occasional starvation; to force himself to eat unsavoury and indescribable morsels served on a piece of bark or in his fingers, that he might not wound the Indians' feelings or lose their confidence. "Conquered by hunger," he says, "we could learn to consume these victuals without much repugnance, for under the empire of this cruel step-mother the world becomes savage."

HIS MASTERY OF THE INDIAN DIALECTS.

But during his first year on the Saskatchewan, his biographer records, he fared well, physically and mentally. The inhabitants of the Fort, from Rowand down to the youngest dog-runner, were mostly Catholic, and he busied himself instructing young and old. On Sunday Mass was celebrated with impressive solemnity, the French-Canadians being taught to sing the liturgy. Fifteen days spent at Lac la Biche, an Indian centre 150 miles from the Fort, in company with Alexis Cardinal, a half-breed who was to share many perilous trips with the young

missioner, having brought home to him the need of increasing his knowledge of Cree, he resolved to master that dialect, devoting several hours a day to its study, under the tutorship of a Scotch clerk, Colin Fraser, whose wife had been baptised by another famous missionary, Father de Smet. A notebook, in which he jotted down all the Cree words and grammatical rules at this time, was the genesis of the Cree Dictionary and Grammar he afterwards compiled. In his many goings and comings, by the firelight in Indian tepees or log missions, he contrived with persistent labour to make voluminous notes on the Cree language. At Bishop Grandin's instance he subsequently wrote a score of sermons in Cree, embodying the whole Christian doctrine. He acquired it so rapidly and so thoroughly that his knowledge of the Cree language was admitted by the half-breeds to be superior to their own. It was one of the keys with which he unlocked the hearts of the Indians. In their beautifully expressive language he was always known to the Crees as *Kamiyo-atcha-Kwee* (the Man of the Beautiful Soul), and to the various Blackfeet tribes as *Arsous-Kitsirarpi* (the Man of the Good Heart)—epithets which crystallised into a couple of phrases the great missionary's salient characteristics. He became endeared to them and they to him. He could subdue or soften them at will. He alone could tame the bully of Fort Edmonton, a wild Metis named Paulet Paul, whom he transformed into a meek Christian, or face with unblanched cheek the fierce Blackfeet.

THE PIONEER MISSIONERS OF THE NORTH-WEST.

"The first missionaries," he relates "were exceedingly poor, and had little assistance from their superiors, who for their part had few resources at their disposal. The Society for the Propagation of the Faith was far from being able to assist us then as it did later; moreover, our means of transport were practically nil. We depended entirely upon the

goodwill of this good Company * to go from one post to another, and to convey thither our small luggage. The chief officers, few of whom were Catholic, sometimes looked on our arrival and our work with a jealous eye. In addition to this, they felt that their policy was being interfered with—that policy of preventing the entrance of civilisation and of retaining the old regime. We were received and tolerated, but it was because they could not do otherwise." Still he admits that they were "honourably and charitably treated by the Company," and elsewhere adds: "I repeat what I have said many times, that if we had not had the aid and the hospitality of the Hudson's Bay Company, we could not have for a long time begun or carried out the establishment of the young Church of the North-west."

Father Lacombe shifted his headquarters to Lac Sainte Anne, fifty miles north-west of Edmonton, the first permanent mission for Crees and Cree-Metis established by Father Thibault on the Upper Saskatchewan in 1842, remote from the Blackfoot trail to the Fort, and thus secure from these traditional enemies of the Crees. One of the worst enemies of the Indians of this time was the drink abuse, against which the missionaries waged for six years an effective campaign.

New workers continued to be sent into the mission-field, one of whom, Vital Grandin, a handsome Breton priest, afterwards Bishop of St. Albert, became an intimate friend of Father Lacombe in later years, as well as one of the most striking figures among the pioneer missionaries of the North-west.

Father Lacombe's skill as an amateur physician in mitigating the sufferings of a tribe of Blackfeet from a scarlet fever epidemic in 1857, until the missionary himself was laid low with the malady, won him the goodwill of that bellicose race. His regular ministry in 1859 lay largely with the freemen and Metis, but the Indians came to him for direction in increasing numbers. Sometimes he found his little chapel at

* The Hudson's Bay Company.

Sainte Anne too small for the devout Christians who gathered there. He was busy repairing it one August morning of that year when he was called out to welcome Lord Southesk, who in his book of western travel records how he had the pleasure of dining with "Pères Lacombe and Le Frain at the Roman Catholic mission-house. . . . Agreeable men and perfect gentlemen," he notes in his diary; commenting on the fact that Rome has an advantage in the class of men she assigns to her missions, as she always sends out "polished, highly-educated gentlemen." He found "everything wonderfully neat and flourishing—a true oasis in the desert. . . . Surrounded by such comfort and refinement, and in the society of such agreeable entertainers, I passed a most pleasant evening, one that often recalled itself to my memory amid the experiences of later times." He felt sorry to leave Sainte Anne, "all was so kindly and pleasant," and concludes: "God bless them and prosper their mission."

BISHOP TACHÉ.

The advent of three Grey Nuns from Montreal to open a house that was to be at once a boarding-school, orphanage, hospital and refuge for the aged, and the pastoral visits of Bishop Taché, were the great events of 1860 in the little mission lost in the woods. It was the first time the Indians saw a Catholic bishop. Having come unprovided with a crozier, Father Lacombe, with a hunting knife, fashioned one of green wood, tinted with yellow ochre,* which his lordship carried with due dignity at the Midnight Mass, remarking that it was a pastoral staff as primitive as that of the shepherds who tended their flocks in the hill country of Judea on the first Christmas Eve.

One day during his visitation at Lac Sainte Anne a Blackfoot chief, arrayed in savage splendour, sought

* This staff was preserved as a memento over the rafters at Sainte Anne.

an audience with the bishop, asking, in the name of his tribe, that a priest should be sent among his people; promising that the missionary would be unmolested, and that, while he was with them, they would not make war on the Crees; the priest to carry a white flag with a red cross on it, a symbol easily recognisable, and to be respected by all. Since Father Lacombe's healing offices to them during the epidemic they had been anxious to secure a share in his ministrations. The result was the foundation of another mission nearer the Fort, where the Blackfeet could be assembled from time to time. A hill overlooking the Sturgeon valley was chosen as the site of the new mission, which, by desire of the bishop, was called St. Albert, in honour of Father Lacombe's patron saint. Planting his staff in the snow where they stood the prelate said: "Here you will build the chapel!" and on that exact spot a few months later Father Lacombe erected the altar of the mission-chapel.

CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT MISSIONERS COMPARED.

The year 1862 found the indefatigable Blackrobe, axe in hand, hard at work on the buildings. His activity did not stop there. He had built a small scow or raft, which he used as a ferry, swimming his pony across the swollen river at the foot of the hill to be in time to celebrate Mass every alternate Sunday at the Fort. This did not suffice, and he resolved to build a bridge. With him to will was to accomplish. In three days he had a solid bridge spanning the stream, the only bridge Lord Milton and Cheadle note that they had seen in the Hudson Bay Territory. He did more. To bring more workers and goods to the mission, and save the payment of high freight rates, he organised the first brigade of carts to cross the prairies with freights between Fort Edmonton and the Red River. The convent being well advanced, he opened also the first regular school west of Manitoba, in which he

gathered a lot of young Indians, wild as hares, and erected the first horse-power mill on the western plains to grind the flour for the colony of St. Albert. It was a source of great surprise to Governor Dallas of the Hudson's Bay Company when he arrived at Fort Edmonton on a tour of inspection. Striking the table to emphasise his remarks he said to his companion: "See the thrifty way in which these missionaries make the most of everything, in spite of their poverty. See how, with all our resources and our hundreds of servants, our forts are falling to ruin, while these priests, who come into the country with nothing but a little book under their arm"—referring to Father Lacombe's breviary—"they are performing wonders. Their houses spring up from the ground like trees—growing bigger and better all the time; while our forts are tumbling to ruin." Lord Milton and W. B. Cheadle, who visited St. Albert in 1863, were equally impressed. "The priest's house," they noted, "was a pretty white building, with garden around it, and adjoining it the chapel, school and nunnery. The worthy Father, M. Lacombe, was standing in front of his dwelling as we came up, and we at once introduced ourselves. . . . He welcomed us very cordially. . . . Père Lacombe was an exceedingly intelligent man, and we found his society very agreeable. . . . Gladly accepting his invitation to stay and dine, we followed him into his house, which contained only a single room, with a sleeping loft above. The furniture consisted of a small table and a couple of rough chairs, and the walls were adorned with several coloured prints, amongst which were a portrait of His Holiness the Pope, another of the Bishop of Red River, and a picture representing some very substantial and stolid-looking angels lifting very jolly saints out of the flames of purgatory. After a capital dinner we strolled around the settlement in company with our host. He showed us some very respectable farms, with rich cornfields, large bands of horses and herds of cattle. He had devoted

himself to improving the condition of his flock, had brought out at great expense ploughs and other farming implements for their use, and was at the present completing a corn-mill to be worked by horse-power. He had built a chapel and established schools for the half-breed children. The substantial bridge we had crossed was the result of his exertions. Altogether, this little settlement was the most flourishing community we had seen since leaving Red River, and it must be confessed that the Romish priests far excel their Protestant brethren in missionary enterprise and influence. They have established stations at Isle à la Crosse, St. Alban's, St. Ann's, and other places far out in the wilds, undeterred by danger or hardship, and gathering half-breeds and Indians around them, have taught with considerable success the elements of civilisation as well as religion; while the latter remain inert, enjoying the ease and comfort of the Red River settlement, or at most make an occasional summer's visit to some of the nearest Posts."

FORMING NEW SETTLEMENTS.

Scouring far out over the plains with his Red Cross flag—the small white pennon emblazoned with the cross—to meet the Blackfeet in their own country, he encountered and confuted a sorcerer and medicine-man, an aboriginal quack who was the ruling spirit in a camp of over three hundred hostile Pagan Crees. "With all the ardours of his warm nature," writes Miss Hughes,* "Father Lacombe burned to reach every tribe on the plains—group after group, to gather these poor nomads in fresh colonies, to live there in pastoral contentment and certainty of food. As each settlement was formed it would be his aim to turn it over to some of his younger brethren, while he pushed on again into the wilds with his Red Cross flag and his plough to bring into Christian submission still other bands of savages."

* Op. cit., p. 106.

An ecclesiastical free-lance, he wandered at will, in quest of souls, over an immense area inhabited by eight different scattered tribes, constantly appearing at the most unexpected points; or rafting down the Saskatchewan to a permanent mission he established for the Cree Indians; or responding to another call from the Blackfeet, now stricken with typhoid, helpless and fearful of a disease which was to them a mysterious malady, to whose bodies and souls he ministered; or, again, teaching the women and children how to sow vegetables. When seized himself with a form of dysentery, which was carrying off all whom it attacked, he wrote to Bishop Taché: "If this sickness carries me off, at least my sacrifice is made. I will die happy among my neophytes, ministering to them as long as I have strength." Restored to health and work, he writes with his wonted buoyancy: "Hurrah for the prairies! . . . Hey! I am in my element. My cart, my three horses, my good Alexis, and our Blackfoot cook, with whom I am studying the Blackfoot language, my tent, my chapel-case, my catechisms and objects of piety—behold my church and presbytery! . . . To tell the truth, I am as happy as a Prince of the Church, My people, about half of whom are Christian, and men of good prestige as hunters—they respect me, they love me. I feel like a king here, a new Moses in the midst of this new camp of Israel. It is not the manna of the desert with which we are nourished, but it is the delicious buffalo-meat of the prairie which the good Master gives us." He delighted in the plains, whether radiant in brilliant sunshine or still beautiful in the lingering light of evening, when, he tells us, "seated on the fresh grass, with the vaulted skies sown with stars for our house of adoration, silence falls—the ravens and the little birds are asleep, but man keeps watch. It is then our songs of good-night are sung to the Great Spirit—and how beautiful seem these hymns of the children of the wilderness! And there amidst them, happy in his lot, see this man in a soutane. How

eloquent and fine it seems to him to say to them in their own language—taught by these fierce warriors—‘Go, and sleep tranquilly, my children. May the Great Spirit bless you. *Au revoir* till morning.’”

IN DANGER OF DEATH.

This tranquillity was soon disturbed by one of those hazards of Indian life which went near removing from the field of his fruitful labours the courageous and intrepid missionary. There was a renewal of hostilities between the Crees and Blackfeet, which led to a battle on the night of December 4, 1865, when Father Lacombe was quartered in the lodge of Chief Natous. Guest and host were sleeping soundly on buffalo robes when they were suddenly aroused by the Crees, who, bent on slaughter, opened fire on them. Balls whizzed past the priest as he hastily assumed his soutane, snatched up his surplice and stole, and, reverently kissing the cross of his Order, paused to make a brief, generous offering of his life to his Maker. Then, alert and fearless, with his Red Cross flag in hand, he plunged into the outer darkness. Many of the young Blackfoot warriors were away hunting buffalo, but those who remained under Natous fought on recklessly. Father Lacombe, in the midst of a hideous din, called upon the Crees, some of whom were Christians, to withdraw. It was pitch dark; no moon or stars were visible. The living stumbled and fell over the dead, and the wounded pleaded for help. A woman standing near him fell, pierced by a bullet; he baptised her and prayed with her till she died; next morning she was found scalped. A thieving Assinaboine, in the act of pillaging the chief's tent, was shot, and fell grasping Father Lacombe's breviary. Before dawn, which still found them fighting, half the camp was destroyed. The missionary, begrimed with the battle smoke, raising his crucifix in one hand, and the Red Cross flag in the other, called on his Blackfoot hosts to cease firing. Then, at the risk of his life,

he deliberately strode out from the camp, and bravely confronting the enemy's fire, while bullets whizzed past his head and ploughed the ground beside him, he shouted: "Here! you Crees. *Kamiyo-atcha-Kwe* speaks!" The Blackfeet called out to him to come back, as the Crees, who could not see or hear him, owing to the din and the morning mist and the surging smoke, were still firing. Suddenly a ball, rebounding from the earth, struck him in the forehead. Though the wound was slight the shock was great, and he staggered, lost his footing, and fell. The Blackfeet thought he was mortally wounded—he, their friend, their physician, the Man-of-the-Good-Heart, who had nursed them through the typhoid, who had now heroically risked and, perhaps, laid down his life for them, to save them from their hereditary enemy! Filled with grief and rage, and raising their war-cry, they instantly flung themselves upon the Crees, a Blackfoot crying out: "You have wounded your Blackrobe, dogs! Have you not done enough?" Then the Crees ceased firing and withdrew in confusion. The encounter lasted seven or eight hours. The Chief Natous was badly wounded, about twelve killed, fifteen men and women wounded, some fatally, and two children stolen: while the attacking party carried away their dead and wounded, the former numbering ten and the latter fifteen. Father Lacombe lost everything except what was on his person, and his rescued breviary. Two hundred horses were killed or stolen, including two of Father Lacombe's. For ten days longer he remained with the Natous, caring their wounded. Then, with three Indians, he set out for Rocky Mountain House, which, travel-stained and half-starved,—for their food supply had run short—he reached in a very weak state, to fall into the arms of Richard Hardisty, Lady Strathcona's brother, who was startled by his appearance. "Don't cry, don't cry, my friend," he said, "I've been to war; but now, you see, I am back." He was at the end of his resources. "Richard Hardisty," he recalled

afterwards, "treated me like a brother that day. I felt so sick and tired and hungry when I got to Mountain House that I was ready to lie down in the snow and die. But he took our miserable party in before his big fire, and warmed and fed us, and clothed me, and I always feel since then that he saved my life." That life was to experience many more vicissitudes and thrilling incidents before he finally quitted the mission-field.

Rumour exaggerated the exciting episode in the camp of the Natous. It was reported that Father Lacombe had been killed in a battle near Three Ponds; some Crees even showed a *capot* like his taken out of his tent with several bullets in it. His reappearance on Christmas Eve, 1865, at Fort Edmonton, however, dispelled these rumours. He had neither been dismayed nor done to death. "I was never less afraid than I was during this combat," he wrote to his Superior-General, Monsignor Fabre. At the Midnight Mass the congregation of *voyageurs* listened to the oft-repeated, but always alluring, story of the Divine Infant related in English, French and Cree. "They were wholesome, western men, vigorous creatures of strong passions and ready faith," comments Miss Hughes, "and they accepted happily the mysterious union of weakness and omnipotence, the tale of Love stooping to earth to win it otherwise than by force."

LIFE ON THE PRAIRIES.

Most of the year 1866 was spent by Father Lacombe on the prairies with his Indians. Besides Indians he collided with many nationalities on the plains. The ubiquitous Scot, and the no less ubiquitous Irishman, was, of course, much in evidence among the motley, ever-shifting crowd. One of the curious characters he met, a quaint little Irish-American, was known by the very Celtic cognomen of "Jimmy-from-Cork." Another type of the scattered Gael was Sam Livingstone, who greatly interested him as one of

the most picturesque figures he had met in the west. The son of an Anglican rector in Ireland, and born in the Vale of Avoca, he had drifted through the United States to the Saskatchewan.

His journal records many experiences; how he rescued a young woman of one of the southern tribes, captured by a band of Indian warriors;* how during his absence from St. Paul the wolves ate his horses; how the Indians about the mission fell ill, and the little house was turned into a hospital; and so on. During the summer of 1867 he designed a house-tent of tanned buffalo skins, his heart being set upon celebrating midnight Mass for his Indians in this ambulant chapel. For years the French priests in the west had plodded along as best they could, with nothing better than a skin tepee, in which it was often impossible to say Mass if the wind was high, because the smoke circled about the lodge half-way up, and filled the throat of a man standing. Once Father Lacombe had to celebrate Mass on his knees to avoid the smoke. Another day, at the Elevation, his crucifix, hanging to the tent above his head, plunged into the chalice.

Projecting a vigorous missionary campaign among all the warlike, stubborn southern tribes, during a journey through the snow to a Cree camp, they came across a group of eighteen wretched, almost starved, Indians, reduced to skin and bone, the children being too weak to play or cry; they had not tasted a mouthful of food for many days. To relieve their wants he and his companions, pitching their camp beside them, mutually resolved to do without food for three days. For fourteen days they toiled across the trackless prairies, and experienced all the horrors of famine. Father Lacombe, like the others, was failing from sheer weakness; his

* The restoration of this girl subsequently to her own people, the Blackfeet, gained for Father Lacombe more influence among that tribe and spread more desire for his prayer than many sermons or visits would have accomplished. She had meanwhile been placed under the care of nuns and christened Marguerite.

sight grew dim and his vision of things blurred; his neck seemed to totter under the weight of his head; the faintness of death was stealing over him. Rallying himself with an effort, he caught his mind wandering as if he were delirious. On one day they had nothing but a bouillon made of the skins of old sacks, cords of sinews, and old pieces of moccasins. "My dear friends, and you who seat yourselves at tables covered with appetising food whenever you need it, let me tell you," he wrote, "how painful and torturing it is to know hunger in circumstances like these! Up to that time in my sermons and instructions to the Indians—some of them lazy—I had said many times, I had proclaimed, that those who did not want to work, *should not eat*. But now, after such an experience, I have changed my ideas, and I have taken the resolution to share my last mouthful with anyone who is hungry. After experiencing such hardship from hunger, how clearly one understands these words of the Father of the Poor—'I was hungry and you gave me not to eat.' " The starving band had reached the last point of endurance, and Father Lacombe had resolved to kill his horses to supply them with food, when the Indians came upon the hearth fires of their people and were succoured.

MIDNIGHT MASS ON THE PLAINS.

Christmas Eve came round again—called by the Indians *Ka-nipa-ayam-iliak* (the time we pray at night). The house-tent was fixed up, Confessions were heard, and for the first time on the prairie Father Lacombe exercised his priestly privilege of saying three Masses on one day. The hunters attended the first, the women the second, and the children the third. At midnight he stood before a rude altar made of poles, surmounted by his chapel-box. "As I robed myself for that Mass," he writes, "this is what passed in my heart. The Holy Gospels tell us that the shepherds of the valley of Bethlehem came to the stable to



Lord Strathcona and Fr. LaCrosse, on the Lawn, Government House, Edmonton, Alberta, November, 1909.

adore the Divine Child. And here to-night, in this wild country in North America, another kind of shepherds—the shepherds of the great flocks of buffalo—are kneeling down to adore the same Child Jesus, the Son of God, who lay on the straw in Bethlehem in the far East. And when these old shepherds began to sing the canticles of the Church in their own tongue—*Emigwa tibiskayik* (there let us shepherds assemble)—for some time I could not begin my Mass, because the tears came and I wept. Ah, that scene was a poem . . . those warriors and hunters singing the hymns that are of the Church the world over, the same old melodies we sang at St. Sulpice for the *Noël*! Ah! I have said Mass in St. Peter's at Rome, in the basilicas in France, and in many places, but I say to you, this was the most solemn Mass—the grandest of all!" After the second Mass, being still very weak, and feeling his head reel with faintness, as it did during that awful fortnight on the prairies, he threw himself down on a bed of buffalo skins laid over boughs and slept from sheer exhaustion.

PIUS IX. AND THE INDIANS.

When, later, he was bidding good-night to the men at the entrance to his tent a Metis courier from St. Albert delivered into his hands a packet containing a letter which brought the tears to his eyes. It was from Bishop Grandin in Rome, describing the position of the Pope, assailed on every side, and enclosing a copy of the Papal decree convoking the Vatican Council. An Indian chief asking him what was the news that moved him so strongly, he explained the purport of the letters, reading from the decree some words of "the Grand Chief of the Men-of-Prayer." All pressed forward to see it, one old man bending down and kissing the page. The Indian chief, though not yet a Christian, asked the Pope's name, and, when told it, stood up facing his braves, and holding aloft the Papal decree,

exclaimed: "Pius IX! Pius IX! . . . Listen, all my people present—Pius IX! May that name bring us good fortune!" Then, sweeping an arm out over his seated tribesmen, he called out: "Rise and say Pius IX!" And they all arose and repeated after him the Pontiff's name. "This scene," comments his biographer, "might have furnished another paragraph to Macaulay's admiring study of the Church of Rome. For while its Pontiff, the 'Little Father of the Poor,' was being driven to his last redoubt in the Vatican—only saved from the Garibaldian forces two months earlier by an army of men from every civilised nation—here in this western wilderness new races were enlisting under his banner, and a miserably clad but valiant soldier of Christ was moved to tears at the unlooked-for tribute to his chief. In the following year Father Lacombe sent the details of the little incident to his early patron, Bishop Bourget, who was then in Rome. The aged Pontiff, profoundly moved by the happening, asked the Bishop to convey his blessing to Father Lacombe, his good chief, and the Indians." *

THE HALF-BREED COLONY.

The most important incident in 1868 was Bishop Grandin's arrival at St. Albert, which marked the elevation of the half-breed colony to the dignity of an Episcopal See, and connoted a long advance since the advent of Bishop Provencher, half a century before, to establish Christianity in Rupert's Land. When the new bishop, who had so lately in the Arctic regions lived in a mud hut, officiated in the little chapel he had to take care lest his mitre might be knocked off by the rafters. His palace was of logs, and measured sixteen feet by thirty. It was uncomfortably overcrowded—a congested district. One of the missionaries there at that epoch wrote: "Eight of us are living in the palace, and we are one on top of another. There are seven of us in

* Op. cit., pp. 155-6.

one room, which serves at once as a parlour, office, carpenter's shop, tailor's workshop, etc. A buffalo skin stretched on the floor with one or two blankets—behold our beds! Mattresses and sheets are luxuries of which we know nothing. We eat bread only on feast days, and then in very small quantities." The meat dried in the sun was as hard as leather, and their beverage was unsweetened tea. "With this not very *recherché* nutrition," says the missionary, "we, nevertheless, are looking well. I especially—I am taking on flesh in such a fashion that they call me Canon."

THE MISSION RAVAGED BY PESTILENCE.

Poverty was not the only thing they had to endure. After exercising his ministry in a camp of nearly 2,700 Crees lodged in 400 tepees; preaching to the half-breeds of St. Albert, combining, as usual, with his spiritual ministry vigorous efforts for the material well-being of his flock; after suffering at times from thirst, to him more difficult to endure than hunger; after having had a narrow escape when a war party of seven hundred Blackfeet were marching on Fort Edmonton to wreak revenge on the Cree-Assinaboines, who had attacked a small trading party of their tribe, killing seven and wounding two, and who abandoned their punitive expedition at his bidding; after performing a journey of over a thousand miles to Fort Dunvegan to visit Father Tissier, who for five years had not seen a brother priest, a journey attended by unusual hardships and illness, and undertaken solely as an act of fraternal charity, he had again to minister to the bodies and souls of the stricken Indians suffering from a virulent epidemic of small-pox, tending the sick up to midnight and burying the dead before sunrise—a battle against disease fought at St. Albert with such reckless devotion by four Oblates that they were all in turn laid low by it. The numerous graves he dug with his own hands. About thirty encampments

were affected, and he estimated that over 2,500 Crees succumbed. In every camp on the plains someone was mourned. That year, 1870, we are told, is a year from which old-timers on the Saskatchewan date modern events, as previously along the Red River all dated from 1852, the year of the great flood.

"The great progress made by Christianity this summer," writes Miss Hughes,* "brought consolation to the Oblates after the scourge of small-pox had spent its virulence. Their absolute devotion to the Indian had not gone unrewarded. The pagan warriors were moved by the unpretentious heroism of the priests; it had shamed their own fear. The attitude of their dying friends enjoying religious consolation also had its effect. An item in the *Journal of St. Paul* records 2,000 baptisms of adults and children on the plains that summer. Among the many conversions was that of Papaskis (Grasshopper), a noted medicine-man, who embraced Christianity, when on his prayer to the Christian God his daughter, the wife of Chief Ermineskin,† was cured. But the conversion that delighted Father Lacombe most was that of his friend, Sweet-Grass, the bravest and most esteemed among the Cree warriors, the Head-Chief of the whole nation of Crees."

Nothing could make Father Lacombe faint or falter in the great work to which he devoted his life. Writing to an Oblate in Montreal, at a time when he was appealing to the Canadian house to secure aid for the missions, he says: "For my part, and I can say the same for my brethren of Saskatchewan and the north, we will die of hardships and privations before we will abandon our Christians and our poor catechumens. Already for a long time I have led the life of the Indians, and the greater part of each year I have been at their mercy; this will not then be anything new for me.

* Op. cit., p. 187.

† Still living on a reserve south of Edmonton.

Provided I have what is necessary to offer the Holy Sacrifice, I do not ask anything else."

FATHER LACOMBE'S LADDER.

In the summer of 1871 he resolved to devote himself entirely to converting the Blackfeet,* dreaming of a Blackfoot Mission on the Bow River consecrated to Our Lady of Peace, in remembrance of the promise they had given him to cease warring upon the Crees. From the questions they put to him they seemed more interested in history than in doctrine. Finding that, unlike most savage tribes, they were to be won through their reason, and not through their hearts alone, he ingeniously made a picture-catechism, which started with the Creation, went down through Bible history to the coming of Christ, and then through Church history, finishing with the close of our earthly pilgrimage—Heaven. The priests, who laughed but approved, called it "The Ladder," from its shape; and the name stuck. The Sisters of the Congregation in Montreal reproduced it in colours; he had sixteen thousand copies of it printed in France; and when it was shown to Pius IX., the Pope ordered several thousand copies to be made, that they might be available for mission work among savage tribes in various parts of the world.

ON A BEGGING MISSION.

This work of predilection he had to lay aside for a year at the bidding of the Bishop of St. Albert, who, nominating him his Vicar-General, sent him on a begging mission among the French-Canadians to secure aid for the schools, which his lordship regarded as the "important work, the only real means of civilising our Indians." † After a brief

* It was at Fort Edmonton, in 1845, that Père de Smet laid upon Father Thibault the mission of Christianising the Blackfeet, a work which eventually fell to Father Lacombe's lot.

† Bishop Grandin was the originator of the existing system of Canadian Indian Schools.

campaign of begging, when he expected his recall to the west, he was sent to Europe to represent Archbishop Taché at the General Chapter of the Oblates. A copy of his "Ladder," which he presented to the Superior-General, so pleased that dignitary that he recommended the publication of ten thousand copies.

"*Cœlum non animam mutant qui trans mare currunt*," says Horace. Crossing the Atlantic did not change Lacombe. The sights of London and Paris did not dazzle him. Museums and historic buildings appeared to him "nothing . . . in exchange for our forests or our prairies, or even our poor chapels." Cartier, the invalided Canadian statesman, Count Bassano and others entertained him; but the visit to Archbishop Manning was to him the most impressive incident of his stay in London. "How this man pleased me!" he writes. "What a worthy Bishop! I made him a present of one of my 'Ladders,' and he seemed enchanted with this new plan of teaching the catechism." Speaking of our separated brethren, Manning urged him to love them as warmly even as he did his own people of the prairies, and to pray for them; "for I was one of them once," he added, "and I know how they believe in their souls they are right—so there is no blame for them that they do not see the truth." "Of course, I have pray for them before," observes Father Lacombe in his quaint broken English, "but that was the firs' time I truly understand the Protestant, and I begin to love them—not only a few like Mr. Christie and Mr. Hardisty, my good friends, but all of them; to pity them and pray for them, because I love them." In Paris he met several distinguished people at Louis Veuillot's; made appeals in churches and seminaries, but met with little success, though he worked "like a negro when not on the trains"; but was heartily welcomed in Brittany, for, the Bishop assured him, "we, Bretons, love the Canadians; they are our brothers."

He was home-sick for the plains. "Notwith-

standing all the beautiful things which I have seen in this France and England," he wrote, "I have looked on sights as fine in the beautiful valley of the Saskatchewan or on the borders of some of our fine lakes. Say what you will, you cannot take this belief from me. I am writing you to-day from a nobleman's palace, but it is not as precious as my poetic tent in the wilderness, where I wrote on my knees my sermons in Cree and Blackfeet." Again: "I am thinking very much of our missions, and my imagination is continually with my dear friends, the Indians."

HIS MANY OCCUPATIONS

On his return to Montreal, notwithstanding his eagerness to go and civilise the Blackfeet, Father Lacombe became absorbed in work for Archbishop Taché, as whose representative it fell to his lot to visit Riel, then deranged and kept under supervision in an asylum. In 1874 he was recalled from a colonization campaign to be made parish priest of St. Mary's, in the growing frontier town of Winnipeg, where a large log-building served as a church and residence for himself and his curate. His new parishioners did not contrast favourably with the Indians. To some of the inhabitants his priestly garb was offensive; whereupon he would indignantly ask: "Why shouldn't I wear my soutane if I want to? We have done much to civilise this country wearing these soutanes; they are the Oblates' uniforms as soldiers of Christ. The policemen, the trainmen, and the Queen's soldiers wear their uniforms—and no one objects. Why shouldn't I wear mine without remark?" His parish consisted of a mixture of all kinds of people—Ontarians, Metis, Scotch, Irish, French and some Indians. It was in his time Luxton started the *Free Press*. Seeing that he was prejudiced against our faith and the priests, Lacombe interviewed him; it was a case of *veni, vidi, vici*. The Oblate and the journalist became fast friends, the

latter defending later on the Catholics' claims to maintain their own schools upon their own taxes, if they so desired. When in 1899 Father Lacombe celebrated the golden jubilee of his missionary labours, Luxton wrote to him: "Your humanising work—not to mention the strictly Christian part—has been such that it cannot fail to command the admiration of all good men who know anything of what it has been."

His occupations continued to be various. With that of parish priest he had to combine the rôle of diplomatist, being invited by the Federal Government to be present as counsellor and friend of the Indians when, in 1877, the Blackfeet were being brought into treaty, as the Crees had been. In this way he played an important part in solving the Indian problem, and rendered valuable service to the State.

SIR WILLIAM BUTLER AND FATHER LACOMBE.

His interest in the Indians never abated. The late General Sir William Butler (then Captain Butler), who met him at Rocky Mountain House in 1870, says: "He had lived with the Blackfeet and Cree Indians for many years, and I enjoyed more than I can say listening to his stories of adventure with these wild men of the plains. The thing that left the most lasting impression on my mind was his intense love and devotion to these poor wandering and warring people—his entire sympathy for them. He had literally lived with them, sharing their food and their fortunes and the everlasting dangers of their lives. He watched and tended their sick, buried their dead, and healed the wounded in their battles. No other man but Father Lacombe could pass from one hostile camp to another—suspected nowhere, welcomed everywhere; carrying, as it were, the 'truce of God' with him wherever he went." It was, therefore, with poignant grief he heard of the destitute condition of the Blackfeet, after

the total disappearance of the buffalo, the Indians' living link with the past, and its meat their chief source of subsistence. "He had known them in their pride—kings of the open plain in their barbaric power—brave and proud, honourable and hospitable, dwellers in frail skin-lodges, yet lords of all the outer world. Now he heard of them as miserable dependents upon the charity of mounted police and the missionaries." * Father Scollan relates how they were devouring their dogs, and had eaten the carcasses of poisoned wolves. A few of the aged died of starvation, and he had seen men leaving their lodges because they could not provide food for children wailing with hunger.

In 1879 he again represented Archbishop Taché at the General Chapter of his Order. Visiting Rome, he presented the Pope with a copy of his Cree-French Dictionary, and in Paris arranged for the publication of a new illustrated catechism for the Crees. Back in Winnipeg the next year, and longing for the Indians, he was selected as the one man fit to serve as permanent chaplain to the workmen engaged in constructing the new Transcontinental Railway, the navvies being in a sadly demoralised condition owing to the presence of whiskey peddlers and other evil influences. It was like trying to cleanse the Augean stables; but though it was heart-breaking to witness so much evil, and feel oneself at times powerless to grapple with it, the results of his ministry in the end were such that most of the contractors and the President of the Canadian-Pacific personally expressed their appreciation of his remarkable services. His Lenten visits to the railway camps covered all the territory between Port Arthur and Winnipeg. In the summer of 1881 the Marquis of Lorne, then Governor-General, travelling by canoe from Thunder Bay, stopped to talk awhile with the bronzed, eagle-eyed missionary in the shabby black cassock. "He was unaware," says Miss Hughes,

* Katherine Hughes. *Op. cit.*, p. 244.

"that he held converse with one whose name would yet fill a larger place than his own in Canadian history."*

It was a trying ministry. Willing as his spirit was, there were times when the weakness of the flesh would make itself felt. The expression "I want to rest" occurs more than once in his diary, and also jottings that show in what direction his heart and his thoughts were ever turning. "My God, send me back again to my old Indian missions; I am longing for that," is an entry eloquently suggestive. When he went to Winnipeg in March, 1882, he learned that at last he might return to his Blackfeet; although the Archbishop was reluctant "to send away an individual who does so much good," and left the decision to the Superior. When it was decided that he was to return west, the Archbishop, in applying to the Canadian Provincial for another missionary priest, refers to Father Lacombe as "my premier counsellor, my adviser, my Vicar-General, a missionary who speaks four languages, one who has thirty years of experience."

PROTECTOR AND CIVILISER OF THE INDIANS.

When he returned to the Indian field he found many changes had taken place. The buffalo were gone, and the Crees were no longer free and independent, but officially restricted to reserves, mere patches of their old hunting grounds. "Father Lacombe," writes Miss Hughes, "could see the Indian of the morrow disregarded, uncared-for, unwelcome, thrust back further and further from his old territory. His heart brooded over it all, and he felt himself called to give the remainder of his life to their protection, as he had once given his years to their evangelization."

Railways opening up the country and the increasing incursions of prospectors and fortune-seekers were

* Op. cit., p. 257.

rapidly changing the face of things. The red man was retreating before the white man; the old order was giving place to new. The social revolution, or evolution, which has marked the course of history all down through the centuries was taking place here as elsewhere. Civilisation in its material aspects had not benefited the higher civilisation. The drink abuse which it brought with it was completing the downfall of the native Indians, begun by the loss of their independence. The one great reproach repeatedly made by one of their Chiefs against the whites was that liquor was continually used by them in the demoralisation of the Indian woman. In 1882 Father Lacombe found that whilst most friendly relations had been established between the priests and the Indians, there had been little progress made in evangelising them. The Piegans and Bloods, therefore, learned with enthusiasm that the Man-of-Good-Heart was going to give the rest of his days to them. "Other Blackrobes," says Miss Hughes, "might be their friends, and they could respect and love them, but this fearless, high-spirited, tender old man was their own, and they loved him greatly." She includes among the three great civilising forces of Western Canada the scores of French Oblates who had devoted their lives to civilising the Indians, and first and foremost of these was the Blackrobe *voyageur*. Canada owes him a debt of gratitude for the help he gave the makers of the Canadian-Pacific Railway when it was cutting its way across the prairies; for his influence quietened the Blackfeet, indignant that grading was being done upon their reserves without their permission. He pays a passing tribute to the worth and work of the courageous men whose daring and enterprise created the Canadian-Pacific, recognising that there was more than money-making in their heads—a great faith and pride in the future of the Dominion. The men who were binding Canada together with rails of steel showed their estimate of the value of his co-operation, for when the arrival of the first train at Calgary

was celebrated by toasts and speeches, Mr. Stephen (later Lord Mountstephen) resigned his position as President of the Canadian-Pacific and Father Lacombe was unanimously voted thereto. For one hour the picturesque old missionary of the plains was by courtesy and vote of the executive the President of Canada's greatest corporation. It was he and President Stephen who first conceived the idea of the ready-made farm which attained successful realisation in the Bow Valley in 1909.

INDIAN INDUSTRIAL SCHOOLS

With the white population taking a stronger hold upon the land the establishment of Indian Industrial Schools became the dominant idea of Father Lacombe. Bishop Grandin had originated a campaign for schools in the mission he laid upon him in 1872. It appealed to him as the final phase of his own work for the West, and though enfeebled now, he determined to carry it through at any cost to himself. He petitioned the Government for funds, with the result that they authorised the establishment of three Industrial Schools—at Dunbow, south of Calgary, at Battleford, and at Qu'Appelle. At first the young Indians were about as much at home in them as wild cats in a beaver's well-ordered domicile; but the Grey Nuns, who had volunteered as teachers, quickly secured control of the younger pupils and held their affections. This was the beginning of a system that has since spread throughout the West, an honest endeavour by men with the best interests of the Indians at heart to solve their problem. The schools were designed to bridge for the Indian the transition stage from barbarism, so that at least the children's children of the warriors of Natous and Sweet-Grass should be fit to cope with the Caucasian civilisation that threatened to overwhelm their race.*

* Miss Hughes. *Op. cit.*, pp 290-1.

HIS PUBLIC SERVICES RECOGNISED

When the insurrection of 1885 was impending, when Riel was again in Canada, and greeted by the Metis as a Napoleon returning from Elba, it was Father Lacombe who kept the southern tribes peaceful, and telegraphed to Sir John Macdonald vouching for the loyalty of all the Blackfoot Indians at Carlton and the West. Until the rebellion ended he spent his time mostly out on the plains, seeking to keep the Indians pacified. His name was one of the watchwords in the camp of the 65th Regiment sent from Montreal to quell the rising, as well as an "open sesame" in the camps of the Crees and Blackfeet. His services in the interest of public welfare were generously acknowledged in public and private by various Canadian statesmen. It was with Father Lacombe and his Oblate brethren in mind that Sir John Macdonald said in a public address in England in 1886: "The finest moral police force in the world is to be found in the priesthood of French Canada." While taking the first census of the Blackfeet and their allies at the request of the Government, Father Lacombe did not forget the imprisoned Crees and Metis, and procured the release of Chief Poundmaker and others, handing them over to the Oblates, who took them north into their own country. On the invitation of Sir John Macdonald, he returned with Crowfoot and others of the allied Chiefs who had remained loyal to the Government. Everywhere the bronzed missionary and his Indian warriors were welcomed. At a public reception in Ottawa Crowfoot's fine manner and physique astonished the assembled multitude. At the close of his speech, placing his hand affectionately upon Father Lacombe's shoulder, and looking down at him, he said: "This man, *Arsous-kitsi-rarpi*, is our brother—not only our Father, as the white people call him, but our brother. He is one of our people. When we weep he is sad with us; when we laugh

he laughs with us. We love him. He is our brother! "

A VANISHING RACE.

The aphorism that love begets love was fully verified in Father Lacombe and his Indian protégés. The affection they cherished for him was cordially reciprocated. His life was one continued sacrifice for them. In one of his many missionary journeys he met a kindred spirit in Mother Katherine Drexel, of the Philadelphia Drexels, who had consecrated her life and fortune to the Indian and the negro. When they parted the parish was richer by several hundred dollars, given by the Nun to be devoted to hospital work among the Indians. Much as he loved them, there were times when he could be stern with them, as well. Miss Hughes gives an instance, which shows not alone his sternness, but his unsurpassed perception of the Indian character, and how to influence it for the best. Five Indian Metis, three women and two men, in contact with low whites, had sunk as low as mankind can sink toward the animal state, and flouted the old priest's appeals to lead more decent lives. Alluding to these black sheep and a mission at Calgary he wrote to Father Legal: "On the eve of the closing I believed it my duty to make a final striking *coup d'éclat*. I covered the altar with the funeral pall, and, to the sounds of funeral knells tolling, I denounced and excommunicated five public sinners—three women and two men—after which we recited the *Miserere*, greatly impressing and astounding the whole assembly."

These Metis were never absent from his thoughts. One of the most absorbing solitudes of his declining years was the rescue of the poorer class of Metis from contamination before it was too late. Having known them in their golden age, he would now gather them into some fertile corner of the West, remote from the influence of white men, their liquor

and their scorn, where they would receive instruction in farming and elementary trades. He repeatedly urged the Government of Ottawa to grant sufficient land for the purpose. Mackenzie, listening one day to his ardent advocacy, exclaimed: "Your plan is an act of Christianity for you; for us it would be an act of patriotism." Writing to Bishop Grandin in 1895 he says: "We, the old missionaries, must not forget what we have done for the Metis and what they have done for us. For their fine attachment and devotion gives them a right to our affections still, notwithstanding the demoralisation of a great number. Let me expend what physical force and energy remains to me in labouring for this undertaking with which God has inspired me, and in which I have faith. It seems to me that Providence has preserved to me, at my advanced age, such measure of health as I have, simply that I may undertake and carry through this work, which to others may appear impossible and absurd." In a letter to the Hon. A. C. La Rivière, M.P., he says: "Above all the souvenirs, happy and sad, of *le bon vieux temps*, above all my pre-occupation with the future, hovers one thought, which little by little is absorbing my mind entirely. Now, I wish to make of the realisation of this idea—of this dream, as some may, perhaps, maliciously call it—the business of the remainder of my poor life as a missionary. The Latins said that they feared the man who read but one book. *Timeo hominem unius libri*. *Moi*, I have but one plan, one supreme plan, and that is to secure to one unhappy race a place of peace and of sweet prosperity." There were then at least eight thousand Metis in the West, most of them poor, many of them demoralised. Having secured a Government grant of four townships of land, he begged money to help his Metis with their buildings and purchase of farm implements, and issued a circular letter in French, English and Cree, calling on the poorer Metis to take shelter in his new colony. "His letter," comments

Miss Hughes,* "in its solicitude for the welfare of the half-breeds, reveals with what poignancy the old priest's mind dwelt on what might be called the tragedy of civilising the Indian; the gradual degradation of this child-race—brought out of Paganism by Christianity as taught—on coming into contact with Christianity as practised by the majority." The burthen of financing the scheme fell upon Father Lacombe alone. While some caught the contagion of his enthusiasm, and entered warmly into his views, others were sceptical, and derided the whole thing as Utopian. His friends, we are told, had been very generous to his appeals for funds, but there was necessarily a great deal of money required by a plan that comprised a chapel, a residence, a boarding-school, a flour and saw-mill, implements, cattle and horses for the Metis, and other assistance. When the colony had been three years established the Government sent an official to investigate and report on it. "It is wonderful," the report stated, "what has been done with so little money." Lord Aberdeen, then Governor-General, when it was submitted to him, wrote: "It is with much pleasure that I signed this report, and I take this opportunity of offering cordial good wishes for the success of the scheme, which has been devised with so much warm-hearted earnestness and practical sagacity by my friend, Father Lacombe."

HIS SOLICITUDE FOR THE HALF-BREEDS.

When in 1901 he saw the condition of the Metis who hung about the poorer quarters of Winnipeg, many of whom had been brought to the town gaol and into evil ways generally through alcoholism and its consequences, "*Pauvres Métis!*" he wrote, "how it hurts me to see them so demoralised. . . . But I will move heaven and earth to redeem them."

* Op. cit., p. 358.

What hurt him also was the indifference and lack of sympathy for the Metis among the whites. "He was himself," says his biographer, "splendidly loyal to this sad remnant of a people, and the more pitiful their condition the more passionate an advocate he became—the more assiduously he sought them out and gave of his charity, spiritual and material." Nothing discouraged him; his faith and zeal never wavered. He attributes to the intercession of St. Joseph and St. Anthony of Padua timely assistance in the shape of a cheque for two thousand dollars from his noble friend, Lord Mountstephen, who wrote from London: "I think your efforts to train the young half-breeds to industrial habits, so that they may be able to gain their own living, is an excellent thing to do, and a truly religious work." In consigning the money to the bishop to be expended for the Metis colony he says: "It is for this, undoubtedly, that the good Saviour prolongs my days, to aid in the completion of this redemption, which appears impossible to all the world but ourselves."

In one of his letters he speaks of "sowing in tears and reaping in joy," and recalls how many times during his long life he had wept with grief, in hardships, contradictions and embarrassments, and shed tears in moments of joy and satisfaction. In the middle of January, 1905, his heart was wrung by a calamity which must have caused him to shed many silent tears. The big convent school at his Metis colony, which sheltered 120 children, was burned to the ground. Practically nothing was saved from the flames. One poor child was burned, and the Nuns, who had repeatedly risked their own lives in bringing the children out of the convent, had several narrow escapes. It was the forerunner of other disappointments and disasters. Bad news received later from his colony drew from him this heart-broken letter: "Nobody to-day can understand my trouble, my grief, my disappointment. I have only God for

witness of my devoted desire to save this population. I will go down into the grave with this sorrow in my heart, repeating '*Bonum est quia humiliasti me.*' My poor Metis! I see them to-day in the prisons, demoralised, about the cities begging for the leavings of the whites to nourish them and clothe their nakedness. And what is most sad is that, humiliated and debased by the whites, some do not venture to come to the Divine services, but remain drinking in their tents. I can only weep in secret over this deplorable state—not even before my brethren, who have no longer any sympathy for these disheartened Christians."

Still, hoping against hope, in his colony of St. Paul until he was eighty-one the aged missionary threw in his lot with his humble friends, the Metis, and strove might and main to save them despite themselves. But the superintendent, not endowed with his optimism, and daily brought face to face with facts, realised that it was no longer possible to continue the settlement on the basis planned by Father Lacombe. Many of the colonists had drifted back into the towns, to the city purlieus and their vicious allurements; others had gone to ordinary homesteads; while the eighty families who remained were well established on farms. The result was that community life was given up, the Metis were put upon the status of other homesteaders in the West, and in the spring of 1909 St. Paul de Metis, as a protected colony, ceased to exist. Father Lacombe was compelled to witness the failure of the one great undertaking of his life in which he had not succeeded

THE HERMIT OF PINCHER CREEK.

Long before this, when the weight of advancing years weighed heavily upon him, feeling the need of rest, to compose his mind and meditate on eternity, he sought a retreat in the quiet foothills at Pincher

Creek, which he called the Hermitage of St. Michael. Like the Curé of Ars, who wanted to go into some corner "to weep over his poor sins," he wished to hide himself from the busy world and lead the life of a hermit. But Providence never meant him to be a recluse. However strong was his desire to part from the world, the world would not part with him. No superfluous veteran, he had still many parts to play upon its stage. When planning his retirement he had to go to Montreal to represent St. Albert diocese at the fiftieth anniversary of the Oblates' arrival in Canada. Even when he went to his hermitage he had soon to quit it again and again for one cause or another, his services in the mission field being in constant requisition. At one time it was to search for volunteer nurses for his Indian Hospital; at other and frequent intervals to be minister-plenipotentiary of the western bishops during the prolonged agitation over the Manitoba school question; for the direction of the school campaign, one of the most important events in the later history of Canada, lay in his hands and those of the statesman-prelate of St. Boniface. Next he had to accompany his Superior-General, Père Soullier, on a tour of the Western missions; then to assume the pastorate of St. Joachim's, Edmonton, of which he says: "What a post for my white hairs!" calling his presbytery "the hotel of the diocese," with a continual stream of callers, lay and clerical, going to and from St. Albert on the northern missions. He was the man in the gap on all occasions, whether it was to negotiate with the Ottawa Government the construction of a bridge across the Saskatchewan at Edmonton, or to be adviser to a Commission appointed to bring the Indians in the Athabasca and Peace River countries under treaty during the Klondyke rush in 1898, the Minister of the Interior, when the treaty was under discussion in Parliament, declaring: "Everyone who has lived in the North-west for the last fifteen or

twenty years, Protestant and Catholic, knows well that there is no man in the North-west looked upon by the Indians with the same reverence and affection as Father Lacombe."

HIS SACERDOTAL GOLDEN JUBILEE.

When the celebration of his sacerdotal golden jubilee on the banks of the Little Slave River, fifty years after old Bishop Bourget had ordained him for the missions of the West, was supplemented by a more imposing function at St. Albert, planned by Bishop Grandin and his co-adjutor, Indians and half-breeds came long distances to camp about the Cathedral and assist at it. It was on this latter occasion that he received the name by which he is known to his friends on two Continents, the *Datur-omnibus*,* the universal man, the man of all work in the highest and broadest sense, a man after St. Paul's heart, the model missionary, *ad omne opus bonum preparatum*. A charming expression which he applied to his attached friend, Sir William Van Horne—"He was beautiful in the little things of life"—might with equal truth be applied to himself. It was not only great causes and big events that appealed to him; he had as much at heart lowly offices and lowly people. Even when he was seventy-two he still claimed that his proper sphere, at the end of his days, was to be with the Indians and half-breeds. "It is so my destiny is written," he declared. His heart was a sanctuary in which the poor, the oppressed, and the sinful found refuge; whether it was the young Metis, Angus Morrison, hanged for the alleged murder of a Scotch settler, but who

* In allusion to a vehicle in Papal Rome so inscribed, which wended its way from one end of the city to the other wherever trouble was. If anyone, innocent or guilty, was pursued or in danger he could take refuge in it; the driver being instructed to take the refugee to some place, where he might await in peace the decision upon his case. It was a kind of ambulatory sanctuary.

protested his innocence, and whom he prepared for death, or the young brave, Peter, accused of stealing horses, and who failed to realise that what would have been considered glory among the Indians was guilt among the whites. To plead for these wild waifs of the plains, or to plead in Rome and Vienna with the Pope and the Austrian Kaiser for Ruthenian priests and funds for the Ruthenians * who had come pouring into Canada along with the flowing tide of European settlers, drawn by the free farms in the West, he was just as ready. Journeys here and there over the wide North-west, begging expeditions alternating with missionary work, and crossing the Atlantic to traverse Europe and the Holy Land, hardly harmonised with his ideas of leading an eremitical life. "Am I then condemned to be always in motion?" he asks. He is always sighing for his hermitage, although his friend Van Horne repeatedly protested against his retirement. "When it is given to one like you to kindle the love and reverence of everybody you meet," he put it to him, "is it right that you should bury yourself in a hermitage? Surely not." When repelling some newspaper

* He first met Pius X. at a public audience. The Pope moved slowly between two lines of pilgrims, speaking a kindly word to each. When he came to Father Lacombe, Archbishop Langevin presented the Oblate missionary. "The two men," records Miss Hughes, "humble and good and great, looked into each other's eyes with mutual recognition of the fine soul of the other. It did not matter that their positions were as wide apart as the colour of their robes—the snow-white of the Pontiff and the somewhat rusty black of the missionary. The heroic son of the French-Canadian *habitant* knelt for the blessing of the great son of the Italian peasant; and as he rose the Holy Father added, smiling, "Well done! well done! *Ad multos annos!*" The Countess Melanie Zichy (*née* Princess Metternich) who arranged the presentation to the Emperor of Austria, in whom she said he would find, as he did, a man of sorrows, asked him, before he entered the throne room, where were his decorations. He smiled and pulling out the brass crucifix of the Oblates, said: "With this I have been decorated for fifty years: it is my only decoration." "You could not have a higher," responded the Countess, who was quite moved.

attacks during the heated controversy on the Manitoba school-question he wrote: "To my great regret, circumstances have thrown me into this atmosphere so foreign to my habits. Only obedience and duty sustain me in the midst of these contradictions." "*On est ermite ou on ne l'est pas,*" he used to say. "*Me voila*—again a hermit," he writes exultingly from Pincher Creek. "Alone on the top of my hill with my dog and my cat again, I say to myself, 'It is so one is a hermit!' I go into church to visit my one neighbour, who is also my kind Saviour, and I repeat the prayers and the office of hermits." He was at rest and content although very poor, having had to sell his horse and the mission-waggon to pay some debts. When in the thick of the Manitoba school crisis he writes: "I sigh for my hermitage. Is it possible that those who pretend to be my friends plan only to separate me from it?" It was to him an oasis in the midst of what he calls "an arid and burning wilderness of unpleasing politics." When he decided to join the Commission to bring the Crees, Chipewyans and Beavers into treaty relations with the Government, he wrote to Bishop Legal: "There is no more repose for me. May the good Saviour have pity on me! . . . This is doubtless the last service I will render our Congregation and my country—as God wills!" People wondered that he was not made a bishop; but as the Bishop of St. Albert expressed it, "God, who directs all with wisdom, has willed that he should be free, that he should lend himself to all and for all." They kept him constantly going. He was a living realisation of perpetual motion. "When shall I ever have repose or tranquillity?" he writes almost plaintively to Bishop Legal.

When, at length, a vicarial Council, in 1904, gave him leave to retire from Calgary, where he had seen the log-mission grow into a populous and prosperous parish, he exclaimed: "*Hourrah pour le Hermitage quand même!*" It was in a tumble-down condition.

In a few years he exchanged from it to the Lacombe Home for orphans and the homeless aged of Alberta—the realised dream of the old missionary himself, for which he collected 30,000 dollars, but which has cost double that amount. It is most fitting for the venerable priest, whose big heart has always glowed with charity, to end his days in the midst of those whom he has gathered together under the capacious mantle of that same charity. After crossing lakes and seas and oceans so often, he could at last say, with the Latin poet, *inveni portum*. There was only one other port for the wearied wayfarer of the wind-swept plains to enter when he should receive the “one clear call” and cross the bar.

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